



Op-Ed: Conventional Arms Control and European Security

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The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (often referred to as the CFE Treaty) was signed in Paris on November 19, 1990, between members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact. At its signing, many analysts hailed it as “the cornerstone of European security,” and it is clearly the most ambitious and far ranging conventional arms control treaty in history. It underscored a transformation of European security that is still ongoing and whose end state is unclear.¹ However, this agreement and the security architecture it established are now endangered.

End of the Cold War and the Adapted Treaty.

The events that framed this transformation have been both largely peaceful and remarkable. Only a year before on November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall which had served as the primary symbol of the Cold War was breached. Six weeks prior to the Paris signing, Germany formally reunified. The 22 nations that signed this agreement have subsequently increased to 34. One of the alliances—the Warsaw Pact—dissolved and the other—NATO—enlarged. A key signatory—the Soviet Union—disappeared and was replaced by a host of successor states. Finally, the nations that convened in Paris did so under the auspices of the Conference on Security Cooperation in Europe or CSCE. This organization has grown to 56 members and became the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

On November 19, 1999, (the 9th anniversary of the CFE Treaty), 30 leaders signed the “adapted” treaty that sought to realign the original agreement with these new political realities. NATO members accepted lower national limits. All signatories accepted a new structure of limitations based on national/territorial ceilings consistent with the principle of host nation consent for the presence of foreign forces on any country’s territory. The agreement also provided enhanced transparency through increased quotas for mandatory on-site inspections, operational flexibilities to exceed, and an accession clause.

The signatories also adopted the “CFE Final Act.” This document contains the following political commitments: (1) reaffirmation of Russia’s commitment to fulfill existing obligations concerning equipment levels in the so-called “flank region” that included the North Caucasus as well as the Leningrad Military District; (2) a Russian commitment to exercise restraint in deployments in its territory adjacent to the Baltic; (3) commitment by Central European countries not to increase (and in some cases to reduce) their CFE force ceilings; and, (4) Moscow’s agreement with Georgia and Moldova on the withdrawal of Russian forces from their territories. At the summit’s conclusion, President Bill Clinton stated that the United States would not submit the agreement for Senate review until Russia had fully complied with these obligations, and all NATO nations endorsed this policy.

The Russian “Suspension.”

On December 12, 2007, the Russian Federation officially announced that it would no longer be bound by the requirements of the CFE Treaty and suspended participation.¹ Moscow took this action because the 22 NATO members bound by the 1990 agreement had not ratified the 1999 Adapted Treaty. During a June 2007 extraordinary conference, Moscow provided a detailed list of “negative acts” by NATO states.² These included overall NATO force levels, the flank limits, and other unspecified demands for additional transparency. Prime Minister Putin, and Russian leaders in general, appeared angry over a series of issues to include NATO enlargement, independence of Kosovo, and plans to install American anti-ballistic missiles on Polish territory. Nonetheless, Moscow stated that it did not intend to dramatically increase its force levels in the territory adjacent to their borders.

NATO members argued in response that ratification remained contingent upon Russian compliance with the obligations it freely accepted when the Adapted CFE Treaty was signed, the most contentious being the full removal of all Russian military forces from Georgia and Moldova.

Russia has adamantly refused to accept this condition, and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has publicly argued that “there is no legal link” between the Adapted CFE Treaty and these commitments.³

Consequently, for almost 4 years, Russia has not provided data as part of the biannual data exchange. Neither has Russia provided the required information describing changes to the location of ground treaty limited equipment, and has refused to comply with the treaty’s inspection regime. The implications of this situation for the future health of the CFE Treaty are serious. Although other parties continue to implement the treaty in full, the current situation where Russia is not implementing core treaty provisions cannot be sustained forever.

Search for a Solution.

In response, NATO initially endorsed a “parallel actions package” in March 2008. This represented a serious shift in the NATO position, as it called for NATO countries to begin the ratification process while Russia commenced its withdrawals. Once all forces had been removed from Georgia and Moldova, NATO countries would quickly complete ratification of the Adapted Treaty. NATO members also pledged to address additional Russian security concerns once the Adapted Treaty was ratified. Unfortunately, this effort made little to no progress and was undermined by the conflict in Georgia. The situation was further complicated by Moscow’s subsequent decision to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent nations.

In the past year NATO modified its approach. European and American leaders sought an agreement for a framework that would include principles on conventional arms control and open a path to a new negotiation. This effort now appears to be foundering because the Russian Federation has refused to accept any reference to “host nation consent” as a fundamental principle.

Consequently, it is not too far-fetched to imagine that the entire treaty regime could unravel. Its demise could cause a dramatic realignment of European security. The loss of information and the undermining of predictability would set the stage for historic animosities to resurface and lingering crises to potentially worsen. For example, there have been suggestions that Azerbaijan is counting on the failure of the treaty to provide it an opportunity to increase its military forces. Such a development would clearly exacerbate tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴ Furthermore, Russia would lose transparency over the military forces of

existing or future NATO members as well as the deployment of alliance forces on the territory of new members. Finally, the Baltic republics would remain outside the agreement and, consequently, there would be no mechanism to provide transparency about military forces on their territory.

CFE's demise could encourage an expansion in military forces or damage other agreements. Russia might reconsider its participation in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) in an effort to improve its security posture. Balkan observers believe that the demise of the CFE Treaty might mean an end to the arms control arrangements contained in the Dayton Accords. Obviously, such a development could contribute to renewed violence in that troubled region.

Conclusions.

With the rising threat of critical transnational issues, the fate of conventional weapons in Europe may not top the priority agenda for NATO or Russian leadership. But while the original purpose of the treaty-to reduce the risk of conflict and short-warning attacks between the two blocs-may be a requirement from the past, the CFE Treaty continues to contribute to Europe's security in crucial ways. The transparency and predictability that it provides serve as important stabilizing elements as European relationships continue to evolve, and military forces are modernized.

In the aftermath of the Lisbon Summit, it is also clear that both NATO and Russia wish to cooperate on a wide ranging series of issues. Furthermore, the Obama administration has underscored its desire to "reset" relations with the Russian Federation. The signing and subsequent ratification of the New START agreement by the Senate and Russian Duma were major steps forward. Pressing issues such as the war in Afghanistan, nuclear proliferation, North Korea, Iran, etc. can only be addressed through the efforts of European, Russian, and American leadership. The lingering CFE gridlock could exacerbate tensions and serve as an obstacle to progress in these other areas.

In the next month, there will be further attempts to find a solution. If these fail, the fate of the treaty could be discussed by President Obama and President Medvedev at the G8 Summit, but the clock may be ticking. The signatories are required to conduct a Treaty Review Conference by the end of this calendar year to examine what has transpired over the past 5 years and to determine any changes that are needed for the future. Consequently, a compromise must be found by year's end.

A Western arms control expert once remarked that he felt like he was watching 300 years of European hostilities unfold during the course of CFE negotiations. Critics of this process are frequently captivated by the technical details and often overlook the connection between these points and larger security issues. Still, while the “devil may lie in the details,” this accord is rooted in the collective attempt of over 30 sovereign states to improve their respective security. Consequently, it must be acknowledged that historical antagonisms have an impact as well as contributing to the agreement’s enduring value.

Endnotes

1. Zdzislaw Lachowski, “The CFE Treaty One Year After Its Suspension: A Forlorn Treaty?” *SIPRI Policy Brief*, January 2009, p. 1.
2. *Ibid*, p. 4.
3. Wade Boese, “Russia Unflinching on CFE Treaty Suspension,” *Arms Control Today*, May 2008.
4. Lachowski, p. 6.

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